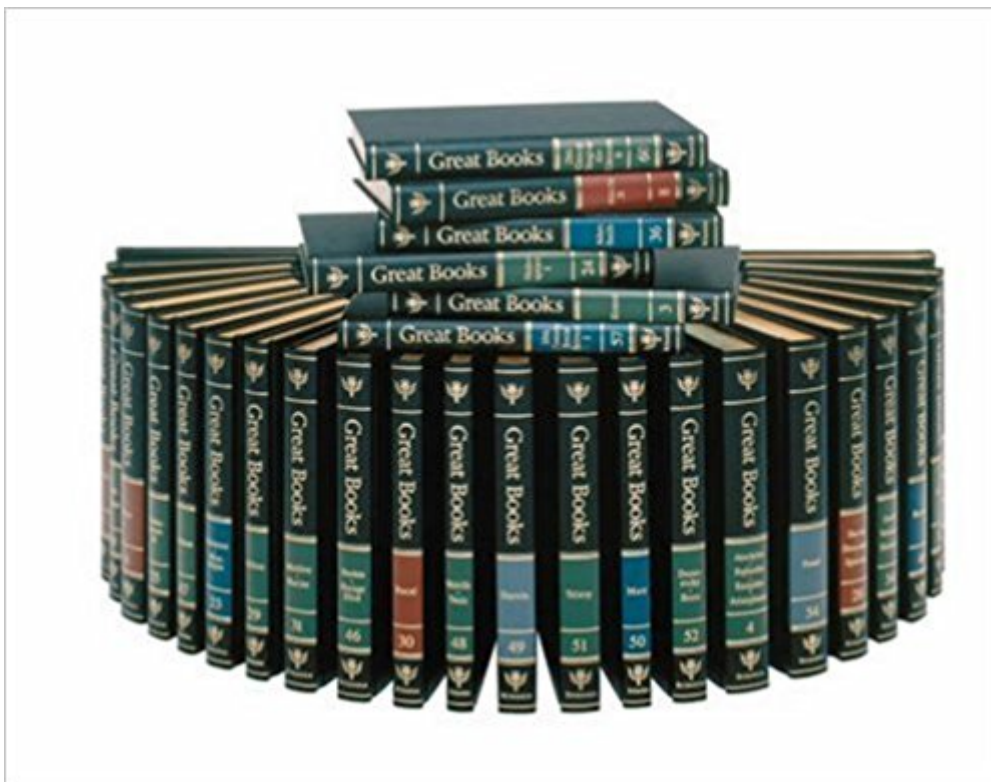


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Customer Reviews

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Let's be honest about these books. The print is cramped, the translations are hideous, and the selections are indeed rooted in a view of Great Books and Great Ideas that, while still quite vibrant, is less robust than it was in 1955. But no one in full control of their senses would sit down and read from cover to cover the Dante, the Homer, the Aristotle found in this set. All true. But none of that matters. What you are buying here is the first three volumes (especially volumes 2 & 3) and their attendant reference set. I've owned the set for 20 years and found it invaluable because of those three first volumes. Here's how they work: Volume 1, The Great Conversation, is essentially an inspirational text centered on the importance of a broad Liberal Education, as set against other views of education. You may take or leave it. The treasure house is the next two volumes. The Syntopicon (volumes 2-3 of the set) is an index of 100 fundamental concepts that built the Euromerican mind and cultural vision. To give you an idea, here is a sample of the Great Ideas: Art, Beauty, Cause, Chance, Democracy, Desire, Emotion, Eternity, Family, God, Good and Evil, Government, Habit, Happiness, History, Immortality, Infinity, Justice, Labor, Language, Life and Death, Love, Mathematics, Matter, Memory, Oligarchy, Progress, Prophecy, Quantity, Religion, Rhetoric, Sin, Soul, State, Time, Truth. War and Peace, Wisdom.... you get the idea: Big Ideas. Each of the 100 ideas is introduced with a brief essay that explains it and attempts to sketch out how it has been viewed throughout Western history. The essays are not dumbed down, but most of them are perfectly accessible to most of us. After this introductory essay, there follows an index of virtually every significant reference to that idea in every author in the set; you are given page numbers within this set of books. THAT is what you are buying. Want to see how Plato's idea of "Punishment" differs from Rousseau's? Just look it up in the Syntopicon, and follow the indexed references. Want to know how "Animal" was dealt with in Montesquieu, William James, and Freud? Go to the Syntopicon. Certainly, once I have looked up the references in the GBWW volume on Plato, I will give the text a read there; but if my interest leads me to want a deeper view, I'll also go to other sources -- more accurate translations, even the original texts, if I have that language -- and read the better translations &c in those books. But I start with the Syntopicon. If tracing out the history of the main ideas that shaped Western civilization appeals to you, this is your set of Great Books. Thus: this is not a set of books you buy to read for pleasure, curled up by the fire on a rainy day. By that standard, this set would be an abysmal failure. But this IS a set of books you would use as one of the most powerful reference libraries you can put on your shelf. By that criteria, you cannot find a better anywhere today, online or otherwise.

I bought this set for my grandchildren. The kids are still too young, but these books will soon be gone. Thoughts from the greatest minds on the most compelling subjects for 3,000 years.

After recently purchasing the 54 volume set at an absolute barging here on , I have begun the long journey of reading through the material presented. This review will focus mainly on the content of the books, how it is presented, and how accessible is the material to the average reader. On my initial reaction upon receiving the books, I was please to find how easy it was to locate specific authors. Unlike standard encyclopedias, this set is presented with each author having their own dedicated volume. This is a feature I liked very much, as I do most of my reading on the go. After examining the text, I must say I was disappointed with the fine print and how condensed the material is. I don't have the best eyesight, so I have found it challenging at times to trod through the material. I have also found that the translations in some volumes are not very accessible to the average reader (The basis of this critique is directed mainly at the claims made by Encyclopedia Britannica, to present these books to the average household reader).The material presented, particularly the great philosophers, is dense academic text, not very easy to get through.My final criticism is the selection of works presented. Western philosophy has influences from all over the globe and from all cultures. In a history as complex as the west, the volumes presented are a little arrogant in its premise that the cornerstone of Western philosophy is the sum of these authors, as it does not include indigenous works, feminist authors or anything in the way of eastern philosophy. That said, I think what you do have is an excellent selection of some of the great thinkers of our past that continue to inform and shape our society, and is a must for those who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of their work.

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